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Autistic adults and their experiences with police personnel: a qualitative inquiry

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This study uses a qualitative methodological approach to investigate the experiences that autistic adults have when encountering police personnel. An anonymous, online, semi-structured survey asking open-ended questions about individual experience was used, and the data were analysed thematically. Although only five participants comprised the final sample, the findings illustrate how – despite differences in types of interaction and police contact – similar experiences were reported. Almost all participants reported experiencing a negative interaction with police, coupled with a limited understanding of the events surrounding their encounter. Four participants experienced some form of being stopped and questioned. This study aims to examine alternative perspectives, as previous research has focused on criminal justice personnel perspectives rather than autistic perspectives. This is one of a few qualitative Australian studies to seek individualised experiences from a community-based sample. Sampling and recruitment strategies need revision to attain a larger number of surveys in future research.

Keywords: autism; experience; police interactions; difficulties; criminal justice; law enforcement; difficulties.

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a developmental disorder that is characterised by persistent impairment or difficulty in social communication, interaction with others and restricted or repetitive patterns of thought, behaviour and interest (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013). Autism is typically identified during early childhood and is seen to impact or limit everyday functioning. Characteristics associated with autism are static, present across all contexts and often significantly impact social, occupational and other areas of day-to-day life (APA, 2013). Unfamiliar situations, such as an interaction with police personnel, can exacerbate an individual's anxiety, impacting on behaviour and functioning (Uljarević et al., 2016). Autism is often referred to as a 'hidden' disability due to many characteristics associated with it not being physically identifiable or significantly noticeable (Archer & Hurley, 2013).

Concern has been raised around the potential difficulties that autistic individuals experience when encountering police personnel and the criminal justice system (CJS). Difficulties experienced have been reported by victims, witnesses, suspects and offending populations (Helverschou et al., 2018). Although individuals on the autism spectrum are not at a higher risk of offending compared to the general population, they are reported to be coming into contact with police personnel at disproportionate rates. Autistic persons are more likely to be stopped and questioned by police than they are

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to be arrested or convicted of an offence (Rava et al., 2017). Factors that contribute to such high rates of contact, along with why difficulties are being experienced by this population, have been paid insufficient attention within the literature (Tint et al., 2017).

Risk factors

Characteristics often associated with autism – such as emotional dysregulation, heightened levels of anxiety and restricted and repetitive interests and behaviours – are argued to contribute to an individual's risk of encountering the CJS at some point in their lives (Tint et al., 2017). Other shared factors which have been seen as contributing to autistic populations encountering the CJS include complex social, health and mental health needs, as well as externalising behaviours such as aggression (Salerno & Schuller, 2019; Weiss et al., 2014). Autistics[1] encountering the CJS are commonly male, older and display low|-moderate levels of independence in the community (Tint et al., 2017). For example, many autistic persons encountering the CJS are unemployed and in a dependent living situation in which they require a wide range of supports within the community. It has been highlighted that many autistic individuals encounter the CJS as a result of struggling in the community due to unmet needs or a lack of support (Kelly & Hassett-Walker, 2016). Increased community engagement has also been seen to be a factor that increases the risk of contact with police.

Community engagement increases the probability of encountering police in different ways. One avenue for encountering police is through random police checks, such as roadside breath tests (Rava et al., 2017). If an individual is struggling to integrate into the community and is receiving little support, they are at increased risk of encountering police as the result of a crisis call, a public disturbance or being stopped and questioned on the basis of suspicion (Helverschou et al., 2018). Commonly reported police interactions involving children and adolescents on the spectrum include cases of missing persons (elopement), public disturbances and crisis calls (Debbaudt, 2001; Gardner et al., 2019).

Another situation in which an individual will encounter police personnel is when they are the victim of an offence and are reporting it to law enforcement. Autistic persons experience higher rates of victimisation than both the general population and other disabled populations. Vulnerable populations often face barriers and difficulties in reporting their victimisations, which has consequently resulted in many victimisations going unreported (Petersilia, 2001). Individuals who have been previously victimised are at increased risk of re-victimisation in the future (Hope & Trickett, 2008). These factors subsequently increase the likelihood of individuals encountering the CJS at some point in their lives.

Difficulties experienced

An individual encountering the CJS can experience difficulties for a number of reasons. Difficulties with communicational barriers, comprehending the situation and

[1] The present study uses identity-first terminology. By placing the positive pronoun in front of the noun, identity-first terminology highlights how an individual's autism is a part of their identity and denotes a sense of membership within a community (Kenny et al., 2016). There is no universally accepted term, and therefore it is argued that it is important to endorse the preferred terminologies held by autistic persons themselves. As autistic voices are underrepresented in the literature, it is important to recognise the terminology preferences of the autistic community wherever possible (Botha et al., 2021; Milton & Bracher, 2013). Thus, terms such as autistics, autistic persons and autistic individuals are used in this paper, as well as individuals on the autism spectrum. Referring to autistic individuals as autistic is supported as the most preferred term by the autistic community, along with autistic individual and person on the autism spectrum (Botha et al., 2021; Kenny et al., 2016). However, we acknowledge that terminology preferences differ on individual and group levels, as well as between health professionals, academics and members of the autistic community (Autism CRC, n.d.; Botha et al., 2021; Bury et al., 2020; Kenny et al., 2016; Autistic Self Advocacy Network, 2009).

understanding instructions as well as behaviours potentially being misperceived by police are commonly reported (Kelly & Hassett-Walker, 2016; King & Murphy, 2014). Autistic persons can often find conflict with others, or perceived conflict, distressing and overwhelming. This is especially so when they are interacting with a person who is perceived to be in a position of authority. The desire to avoid conflict has been suggested to increase an autistic's willingness to comply with the demands or agree with the version of events of CJS personnel (North et al., 2008). If high levels of anxiety and agitation are misperceived as signs of suspicious behaviour or guilt, an interaction can escalate or have unnecessary outcomes (Copenhaver & Tewksbury, 2019). Similarly, non-verbal cues and body language such as lack of eye contact, pacing and fidgeting can be misperceived by police as failing to comply with instructions or 'acting strangely' or suspiciously, all of which impacts the outcome of the interaction (Debbaudt, 2001).

Individuals are less likely to disclose their autism to police if they have previously had a negative experience when disclosing or if they perceive police personnel to not understand autism, and therefore perceive disclosing as unhelpful (Salerno & Schuller, 2019). Police have previously reported primarily relying on self-disclosure of autism for adjustments and accommodations to be provided to potentially vulnerable individuals (Crane et al., 2016). Therefore, it is important that individuals experience positive interactions with police personnel so that they feel comfortable in disclosing their autism in future interactions (Salerno & Schuller, 2019). A negative experience with police personnel can impact how an individual perceives police personnel, as well as their willingness to reach out for help in the future if needed (Gardner et al., 2019).

It has been identified in previous research that police personnel often are not trained in autism and disability awareness (Chown, 2010; Modell & Mak, 2008). When there is limited understanding and awareness surrounding autism within the police force, how police respond to a situation involving an autistic person is likely to be influenced by their pre-existing beliefs and attitudes (Bailey et al., 2001). This can result in individuals being misperceived as suspicious or as failing to comply with instructions (Crane et al., 2016; Debbaudt, 2001). When police perceptions are based on limited knowledge or negative attitudes, potential vulnerability is unlikely to be identified, which can result in the discriminatory treatment of an individual. When vulnerability is not identified, the risk of re-victimising the individual through the processes of the CJS is increased (Debbaudt, 2001).

Previous research has highlighted how perspectives of police interactions differ between groups. For example, when asked to rate their satisfaction surrounding their interactions with and responses to an individual on the autism spectrum, police personnel have reported high rates of satisfaction and self-reported competence in responding to the situation. When asked about the same encounter, autistic individuals' satisfaction levels were found to be low. This is problematic because police personnel are likely to respond to future interactions in the same manner if they are satisfied with their previous responses (Crane et al., 2016). Similar findings are reflected in a study conducted by Maras et al. (2017), wherein the satisfaction levels of autistic persons and their parents regarding their experiences and treatment throughout court proceedings were significantly lower than the satisfaction levels of the CJS personnel involved. These discrepancies between perspectives and levels of satisfaction support the need for future research to inquire into the topic from alternative perspectives, such as from autistic points of view. Further exploration of individual experience is necessary, as previous negative experiences with police personnel can impact individual perceptions and attitudes held towards police. This is illustrated by autistics having reported feelings of distrust, fear and distress when faced with the idea of encountering the police

in the future (Salerno & Schuller, 2019). Moreover, it is important to highlight that parents' perspectives and satisfaction differ from those of autistic perspectives, emphasising the importance of including autistics themselves in future research as opposed to parent or carer samples (e.g. Crane et al., 2016; Maras et al., 2017).

The present study

Difficulties have been experienced throughout multiple stages of the CJS as reported by victims, suspects and witnesses (King & Murphy, 2014; Maras et al., 2017). Police personnel are the most likely first point of contact for autistic individuals encountering the CJS (Bartley, 2006) and are seen to be increasingly encountering autistic individuals (Gardner et al., 2019). Thus, interactions with police personnel are the central focus of the present study. Much of the previous research on this topic has either examined the interactions of offending populations or explored this topic via CJS perspectives (Helverschou et al., 2018; Tint et al., 2017). There is limited research that has inquired into the perspectives of autistic persons (King & Murphy, 2014). The present study aims to contribute to filling this gap in knowledge by exploring this topic via the perspectives of victims, witnesses, suspects and 'other' populations encountering police personnel. Furthermore, previous research has tended to rely on quantitative methods that ask closed-ended and fixed questions (Helverschou et al., 2018). Although insight has been gained through such research, it is argued that qualitative methods are likely to provide rich and beneficial insight on the topic, especially regarding individual experience (Agee, 2009; Salerno & Schuller, 2019). Through using qualitative methods such as open-ended survey questions, the present study seeks to obtain information that has potentially not been obtained through other methods.

This study aims to gain an understanding of the types of experiences that autistic individuals have when encountering police personnel. An additional aim is to examine whether or not any similar experiences are shared across the sample. To explore these aims, an online, semi-structured survey that asks open-ended questions inquiring into individualised and subjective experiences was used. In the present study, police interactions are defined as any type of contact that an individual has had with police personnel. This can include being stopped and questioned by police, roadside breath tests, incidents and public disturbances in which a police response was required, crises and wandering persons (or elopement) cases. The term 'policing personnel' is extended to include other forms of personnel that perform policing roles, such as transport police. This inclusion is based on the assumption that similar difficulties are likely to also be experienced when interacting with these personnel.

Method

Using a predominately qualitative methodological approach, a semi-structured online survey was developed. This anonymous survey asks a range of open-ended questions which allow for verbatim responses, enabling individual experiences and detailed information to be collected in the participants' own words. The study seeks to be inductive and unfolding in its data collection and analysis, thus the data were analysed thematically.

Sample

A community-based sample was sought, as previous studies have paid attention to forensic populations. The population of interest is autistic adults who have encountered police personnel. The study is interested in potential victims, suspects, witnesses and 'other' populations. Participants were required to be Australian citizens and over the age of 18. To access this population of interest, a purposeful sampling method was used. Autism-affiliated organisations who were interested in dispersing the

study information advertised the survey on their platforms. Additionally, equity services from two Perth universities shared the study information with autistic students who were in contact with their services. The sample reach was national, as the organisations were from a number of states within Australia.

Almost all contacts published the survey information through posting on their social media platforms and private forums, or through emailing potential participants. One organisation advertised the study information via flyers that were made accessible at a conference in Perth. Background information was provided along with a link to the online platform Qualtrics, on which the survey ran. Recruitment via advertisements posted on autism-associated organisations' platforms was argued to be the most suitable method, due to the assumption that many individuals on the spectrum are likely to have some form of contact with a range of different organisations and support networks. Thus, the information advertised through these contacts is assumed to have reached the desired target population.

Sample size

Qualitative studies generally obtain smaller samples than quantitative studies (Agee, 2009). Thus, the estimated sample size was expected to be small and no exact number was predetermined prior to data collection. It was argued that for an efficient analysis to take place, a minimum of 10 returned surveys would be required. Due to the unfolding nature of the study, the number of surveys returned at the end of the data collection period would be the final sample size. All completed surveys returned would be included in the final sample. There is no intention of generalising the findings to the wider autistic population, and thus there are no concerns around the representativeness of the sample. This is because the survey responses returned were deemed likely to be highly subjective and individualised. There were no incentives or reimbursements offered in return for participation.

Materials

Data were obtained via an online, anonymous, semi-structured survey which collected open-ended and individualised responses. The survey is comprised of two sections. The first section asked closed questions such as the participant's age, sex, age of diagnosis and age of contact with police. It also asked predominately fixed-response or short-answer questions regarding contextual and background factors. The following section asked open-ended questions which enquired into the participant's experiences during police encounters. These questions focused on how the individual felt, what their thought processes were, how willing they would be to contact police in the future if they need assistance and their level of understanding during the interaction. Individual perspectives, attitudes and beliefs surrounding interactions with police were also sought, along with information surrounding the events leading up to contact with police, the events that occurred during and after the interaction and the outcome of the encounter. The questions were open-ended to avoid leading answers; thus, it was not explicitly asked if the individual's experience with police was negative or if they experienced difficulties.

The survey was developed and made accessible on the survey platform Qualtrics. The online survey was developed by the primary researcher and constructed around the concept of experience. Experience is a multi-faceted concept, and therefore the inclusion of questions that attempted to inquire into different aspects of experience was important. Open-ended questions aimed to obtain responses from participants that enabled discussion of experience from their perspective of events in their own words. An open-ended survey was chosen over an in-person interview due to it being argued that autistic participants would be more likely to engage with it and be

more comfortable in sharing potentially stressful experiences via this method.

Reference group

The initial draft of the survey was published by the Cooperative Research Centre for Living with Autism (Autism CRC) in a private forum which sought feedback on the appropriateness of the survey questions and their readability for autistics. All feedback received was positive, with interest being expressed in the research topic. Minor adjustments were suggested, the majority of which were incorporated into the survey. For example, one participant highlighted how the use of some terms such as 'felt' could be interpreted in different ways or be confusing to an individual. The term 'felt' was suggested to be potentially confusing regarding whether this referred to physical sensations, emotions or individual thinking. This point further emphasised the importance of the survey questions being clear and concise, and more importantly being scrutinised by autistic persons – hence, the survey was semi-structured rather than being entirely open-ended.

Data collection

Autistic adults were invited to partake in the online, anonymous survey and detail the experiences they have previously had when encountering police personnel. The survey was estimated to have taken participants 15 to 30 minutes to complete. There were no constraints placed on the amount of time that a participant could take to complete the survey. Before commencing the survey, participants were provided with an information sheet and consent form, and they were invited to read it and provide informed consent before the commencement of the survey. Participants were informed that their participation in the survey was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any point up until submission. They were also informed that all of the information they provided would be anonymous and that all of the results presented in the final paper would be non-identifiable. The online survey was available for a total of three months, from August to November 2019, to ensure that there was enough time for interested individuals to undertake the survey.

Analysis

Thematic analysis

The data analysis was primarily inductive in the sense that the final themes were generated directly from the data rather than through using pre-existing themes or theories (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Inductive coding is argued to be important in ensuring that data are presented accurately and are representative of the information obtained. Thematic approaches to data analyses are a strength in that they seek to interpret and describe the information obtained without aiming to explicitly develop a theory (Smith & Firth, 2011).

The surveys were imported into NVivo and each response was summarised using the participant's own words. NVivo (released in March 2020) enables coding to be undertaken whilst retaining the raw data, which allows for the decisions made to be traced back and recorded throughout all stages. The data analysis was influenced by the framework method of thematic analyses (e.g. Gale et al., 2013). Each response was analysed and coded manually before responses were compared at a group level. Similarities and patterns across the data set were examined and initial themes were identified. Three types of analytical tools were used within NVivo: word-frequency queries, text-search queries and manual thematic coding. Moreover, a second academic analysed the data separately from the primary researcher before discussing any differences in inferences and evaluations.

Results

All qualitative data were analysed thematically. Despite the limited number of surveys obtained, it is argued that the rich information

Table 1. Sample demographics and background information.

Age (years)	Age of diagnosis (years)	Age of contact (years)	Frequency of contact	Education	Employed	Living circumstances	Service usage
18	3	10	3	Year 12	No	At home with family	Yes
29	27	14	8–12*	TAFE	Yes	At home with family	Yes
31	31	28	1	TAFE	No	At home with family	No
24	23	21	1	Year 12	No	Group accommodation	No
29	10	29	1	TAFE	Yes	Independent	Yes

Note. Age of contact refers to the age of the participant when they first encountered police, as some participants reported multiple encounters. Education refers to the highest level of education. Service usage refers to whether or not the participant has ever accessed services in the community. Participant sex is not included for purposes of anonymity. *This range reflects the verbatim response provided by the participant. Due to the participant providing an indefinite number, the range of 8-12 was maintained to reflect the original answer, as opposed to providing the mean.

gained from the qualitative answers of the participants still allows for an insightful analysis.

Participant demographics

The final sample consists of five participants. Table 1 reflects the diversity of the demographics and background factors of the sample.

The ages of the participants ranged from 18 to 31 years ($M = 26.2$). Four participants were male and one was female. The age of diagnosis of autism varies across the sample, with the youngest age of diagnosis being 3 years and the oldest being 31 years. Three participants were diagnosed after their initial interaction with police personnel, with the remaining two having been diagnosed in early childhood. Four participants reported being in a dependent living situation (either at home with family or in group accommodation). The remaining participant reported living independently. Two participants reported being employed.

The age of first contact with police personnel is varied. The participants who experienced their first contact with police personnel at ages over 20 years all reported just one interaction. The participants who experienced their first interaction with police at the ages of 10 and 14 years reported higher rates of contact – namely, 3 and 12 separate interactions, respectively.

Service access and community engagement

As reflected in Table 1, three participants reported having previously accessed services in the community. Perspectives of and experiences with these services varied. One participant reported their experiences with autistic-affiliated services, organisations and community groups to be positive. Another participant reported some services to be 'good' but noted that services for adults need to focus on more than just employment initiatives, asserting a desire for services to be made available that facilitate community engagement. The

remaining participant reported some services as good and others as 'not very good'. The two participants that answered 'no' were asked to select from a range of fixed-response options to aid in explaining why they had not previously accessed services in the community. An option to select 'other' and provide their own explanation was also available. One participant selected 'don't need them' and the other answered 'too difficult to access'.

Preliminary analysis of qualitative information

Due to the anonymity of the survey, once all analyses were completed the results were represented at a group level so that answers could not be linked to any specific participant. Therefore, themes are described generally and accompanied by example quotes.

Word-frequency query

Due to only having five responses, the word-frequency query was not as useful as it would have been for a larger data set. However, it could still highlight the words that were most frequently used across the sample. Words relating to being stopped and questioned by the police are present in most of the responses ($n = 4$). Thus, this analysis provided some insight into the types of interactions experienced by the participants.

Text-search query

A text-search query was performed based on words associated with individual experience. Keywords such as 'feeling', 'difficult', 'understanding', 'yes' and 'no' were initially searched, as well as terms around being 'stopped' and 'questioned', as the nature of the interaction is also important. The initial terms were grouped and refined into categories.

Thematic coding

The initial text-search queries were compared with the manual thematic coding and categorisations of the verbatim responses. The preliminary themes were refined until the final themes were decided upon. The final categories and themes presented in Table 2 are reflective of both the text-search queries and the manual thematic coding of individual verbatim responses. Further corroborative support for the final themes and categories was provided through a second academic blind analysing the data and cross-referencing the themes arrived at.

Stopped and questioned

Four of the five participants reported encountering some form of being stopped and questioned by police. The reasons given for being stopped and questioned differ across the sample. Two participants reported being stopped and questioned as a result of a random check. The encounters of the other two participants are categorised as purposeful. These interactions are discussed below.

Feelings and emotions

Across the sample, all participants reported a range of negative emotions, including feeling anxious, distressed, worried, unsafe and/or fearful at the time of the event. Three participants reported still perceiving these encounters as anxiety-evoking and stressful.

Limited understanding

All participants reported having little to no understanding of events at the time of the interaction. The reasons given differ across the sample. One participant said that they had little understanding due to being young at the time, adding that they did not realise the gravity of the situation. Another reported transport personnel speaking too fast and not allowing an opportunity to provide other forms of documentation. Similar reasons were given by a third participant, who reported police talking too quickly and not providing an opportunity to ask questions. Perceptions of police not taking the time to ensure that their instructions

Table 2. Final categories and themes from verbatim responses.

Themes	Sub-themes	Example quotes
Stopped and Questioned		'Went to use a payphone and they stopped me […] They stopped me and asked me what I was doing.'
		'Sat there and answered questions when asked.'
		'Questioning me and me asking them questions.'
		'I simply answered all the questions they had.'
Feelings	Anxiety	'Made me nervous and anxious.'
	Unsafe	'I don't feel safe and feel as if I'm going to be judged because of the way I act.'
	Worry	'On some occasions, I felt it could go wrong quickly.'
	Fear	'I felt worried about it happening again.'
	Wrong/Bad	'I actually fear the government and authority even if I'm not doing anything wrong.'
		'I felt bad about having a bad record and being fined.'
		'They asserted I had done something wrong.'
Understanding	Limited	'Not really […] at the time […] I didn't understand the danger I was in.'
		'No. Often there are a lot of grey areas.'
		'He was talking too quickly for me to understand what was happening.' [continued]
		'No. Because they kept me inside to keep me safe.'
Perspectives, Attitudes and Beliefs	Positive	'It really helped.'
	Negative	'They did not use discretion.'
		'There's not enough education in emergency services and transport security […] not kind on autistics.'
		'[…] so many on the spectrum feel lonely and isolated from the general population.'
		'Made to feel like I did something wrong.'

Note. Example quotes are displayed in random order. Not all responses or quotes are included. Examples quotes are used to demonstrate the variety of answers obtained.

and the situation were fully understood were also expressed.

Disclosure of diagnosis

Low levels of disclosure were reported. One individual reported that their parents disclosed their autism to police personnel; the remaining four participants did not disclose due to being undiagnosed at the time, choosing not to disclose or not being provided with an opportunity to disclose.

Types of contact

The categorisation of police contact is based on individual descriptions of the events leading up to the interactions, what transpired and what the outcomes were. For the purpose of presenting the results, tentative categories were created and are discussed below.

Stopped and questioned

Random

These interactions include roadside breath tests and ticket validation checks on public transport.

Based on suspicion

In these interactions, participants were stopped and questioned due to being perceived as behaving strangely or suspiciously, or they encountered police personnel due to being involved in an incident in a public space.

All interactions took place in a public space. The emotions expressed surrounding these interactions included anxiety, stress and fear. Participants reported being worried about a similar interaction happening again.

Victim/suspect

One participant stated that they had been involved in an incident in a public space. Although they described events from what could be considered as a victim's perspective, they reported feeling as though police personnel were insinuating that they had done something wrong. Therefore, this interaction is categorised into both groups.

Contextual variables include non-disclosure of autism due to not having been diagnosed at the time of the interaction. Feelings of anxiety, distress and confusion were expressed.

Victim/complainant

At least one encounter was the result of the participant reporting a public disturbance or victimisation.

Missing person/elopement

The participant was young at the time of the interaction(s). A family member called the police, initiating the police contact. Contextual factors of the interaction include police being aware of the participant's autism, as well as being informed that the participant was partially non-verbal and in a state of distress.

Public disturbance

More than one participant reported having encountered police as a result of being involved in an incident in which police were called to the scene by a member of the public.

Witness

More than one participant reported having encountered police as a result of witnessing an incident or event.

Nature of experience

Positive

One participant reported a positive encounter with police personnel. Despite having been in a state of distress and anxiety at the time, they held positive views of the way in which the police responded to the situation, acknowledging that their assistance 'really helped'. It is important to note that this was a case of child elopement, which may have influenced the positive outcome and the experience reported.

Negative

The encounters of the remaining four participants are categorised as negative. This is due to each participant describing the events and associated emotions, thoughts and perspectives in negative terms.

Impact on individual

Information was sought regarding whether or not the participants, based on their past experiences with police, would feel comfortable seeking assistance from emergency services in the future. Four of the five participants reported being willing to seek help from police, albeit one appeared hesitant. The remaining participant – whose perspective of police was largely negative – reported preferring to avoid police personnel in general.

Discussion

The present study's primary aim was to inquire into the experiences that autistic adults have when encountering police personnel. Despite the limited number of surveys returned, the responses obtained provide rich, first-hand accounts that demonstrate the diverse and nuanced types of interactions that autistic adults can experience.

Contextual variables of contact

The sample characteristics of the present study – such as being male, reporting police contact in early adulthood and displaying a low-moderate level of community independence – reflect those of previous studies (e.g. Rava et al., 2017; Tint et al., 2017). Struggling to cope in the community has been highlighted in previous studies as a potential risk factor for individuals with autism encountering the CJS, and this is especially so if they are undiagnosed (Pearce & Berney, 2016; Rava et al., 2017). Three of the five participants were diagnosed in adulthood, with some participants only being diagnosed after their initial contact with the CJS. Most of the participants reported being in a dependent living situation and engaging in a low-moderate level of service usage. One individual reported feeling that service variety is limited, while another reported not having utilised services in the community due to them being too difficult to access. When diagnosed later in life, the level of service access available to autistic adults is restricted, resulting in the high levels of unmet needs reported by this population (Horlin et al., 2014). The sample characteristics of the present study reflect previous studies wherein background factors such as level of community engagement, level of independence, age of diagnosis and sex can be argued to be potential risk factors for the present study's sample (e.g. Rava et al., 2017; Tint et al., 2017).

Various types of police contact were reported in this study, in which participants were potential victims, witnesses, suspects and/or missing persons. All of the reported police interactions occurred in the community. The most common form of contact was being stopped and questioned by police. This is reflective of previous studies, which have shown that autistic individuals are stopped and questioned by police personnel at disproportionate rates (Rava et al., 2017; Tint et al., 2017). Participants were stopped and questioned by police both randomly and purposefully, with all such interactions reported as negative experiences. Moreover, over half of the participants were stopped and questioned based on suspicion, which also aligns with previous findings, as autistic individuals' behaviours are often misinterpreted and misperceived as suspicious (e.g. North et al., 2008; Pearce & Berney, 2016; Rava et al., 2017). One individual encountered police during childhood as a result of being a missing/wandering person. This is a common interaction as reported in the literature, especially for autistic adolescents and children (Debbaudt, 2001).

Nature of experience

The experiences reported by the participants were largely negative. Despite the diverse types

of police encounters experienced across the sample, similarities in feelings and thoughts as well as low levels of understanding about the situation were expressed. Feelings related to anxiety, distress and fear were commonly reported, in line with the findings of previous studies (e.g. Helverschou et al., 2018; Salerno & Schuller, 2019). In the present study, it is clear that each participant had strong feelings about their encounters with police; four participants reported experiencing unfavourable emotional responses. Furthermore, police personnel appear to have not identified the presence of potential vulnerability and therefore accommodations and adjustments were not made, such as ensuring that the participants understood the circumstances and instructions. The limited understanding of events reported by all participants aligns with findings from previous research. For example, difficulties in understanding have been reported to be experienced by autistics within interview environments (e.g. Chown, 2010; Maras et al., 2014; North et al., 2008), throughout court proceedings (e.g. Maras et al., 2017) and within custodial settings (e.g. Helverschou et al., 2018). Autistic participants in previous research have reported high levels of dissatisfaction with police interactions, which are primarily attributed to an absence of explanation and clarity from police, resulting in high levels of emotional distress and low levels of understanding (Crane et al., 2016). Limited or no understanding of events is problematic, as it increases an individual's vulnerability and can impact the level of adequate support and adjustments made for them.

Although some emotions such as anxiety and distress were a product of the type of encounter (for example, wandering persons), most of the participants attributed their negative feelings to their interactions with police. For example, the mere presence of police personnel made the majority of participants feel anxious. Some reported being fearful of a similar interaction occurring in the future. Previous studies have also emphasised high levels of negative emotions (e.g. Salerno & Schuller, 2019). Furthermore, high levels of anxiety and depression have frequently been reported within autistic populations (King & Murphy, 2014). It has been argued that police encounters, and their often stressful and unfamiliar nature, can intensify levels of anxiety and evoke a range of heightened emotions (Chown, 2010; North et al., 2008).

One participant, however, reported experiencing a positive interaction with police. A range of individual and contextual factors appear to have contributed to this outcome. At the time of the encounter, the participant was a minor and their parents contacted the police due to them being a missing person. Age and type of contact, combined with the fact that the parents informed the police of their child's autism, are all likely to have impacted the police response and resulted in the favourable outcome.

Disclosure of diagnosis

The present study's sample has a low rate of autism disclosure and/or identification, albeit that the parents informed the police of their child's autism in the case of one participant. It is possible that this disclosure played a role in the favourable outcome that was obtained. In contrast to this experience, another participant reported disclosing their autism to police and receiving a negative reaction. This previous negative experience, coupled with the subsequent development of perspectives surrounding limited understanding and education within the police force on autism, resulted in the participant choosing to not disclose their autism during future interactions. This aligns with factors mentioned in previous research – namely, that individuals are less likely to disclose their autism to police if they have previously had a negative experience when disclosing, or if they perceive police personnel to not understand autism (e.g. Salerno & Schuller, 2019). It is important that autistic individuals feel comfortable in disclosing their autism to police, as doing so can influence how an interaction is approached (Crane et al., 2016). When an

individual's autism is made apparent to police personnel, adjustments and considerations of vulnerability are more likely to be made (Chown, 2010; Gardner et al., 2019). It is therefore argued that these individuals who either do not disclose or are undiagnosed are more likely to face difficulties when interacting with police personnel.

Impact on individual

Although some participants reported being fearful of experiencing a similar encounter with police again, all but one stated that they would still ask police for help if needed. However, at least two participants reported being hesitant about seeking assistance in the future, with one stating that they would rather avoid police contact in general. This is a topic that warrants further research, as previous negative experiences can impact an individual's willingness to seek assistance or report victimisations, as well as impacting individual attitudes and beliefs held towards police personnel (Gardner et al., 2019; Salerno & Schuller, 2019).

Limitations

The most prominent limitation of this study is its small sample size. The limited amount of responses obtained has hindered the ability to draw strong inferences and arrive at solid conclusions based on the findings. The small number of responses makes it difficult to discuss results at a group level due to concerns surrounding anonymity. Coinciding with the small sample size is the limitation of reliance on the self-report of participants. Although subjectivity is not a concern or a limitation of the present study, reliance on self-report has still impacted the amount of information obtained due to data collection relying on participant willingness and engagement. Questions regarding individual socio-economic status and ethnicity were not included based on the assumption that the number of surveys returned would likely be small, and thus the inclusion and analysis of these factors would have been unlikely to provide much insight or contribution to the findings. However, it is acknowledged that these factors also play a role in influencing an individual's risk of encountering the CJS, and thus such variables are recommended to be included in future research.

It can be argued that difficulties within society, as well as difficulties when interacting with the police and CJS personnel, are often experienced by socially vulnerable individuals who report receiving little support within the community (e.g. Helverschou et al., 2018). Moreover, many of those who encounter police are unaware of their autism at the time of initial contact (Pearce & Berney, 2016). These two factors may highlight a limitation of the present study's recruitment method: if individuals interacting with police personnel at high rates are also reporting low rates of service usage and low rates of diagnosis, it is unlikely that they are in contact with autism-affiliated organisations. Therefore, recruiting through such organisations might not be the most appropriate method due to survey advertisements being unlikely to reach the desired population. It has been highlighted elsewhere how individuals belonging to vulnerable and often hidden populations are less accessible via traditional recruitment methods (e.g. Ellard-Gray et al., 2015). Therefore, the consideration of other more suitable recruitment options is important. Future research must take this into account before the commencement of data collection in order to obtain larger samples that allow this important topic of inquiry to be examined sufficiently.

Conclusion

Notwithstanding its limitations, the present study contributes to awareness and understanding of the diverse types of encounters that autistic individuals have when interacting with police personnel, along with the multifaceted variables which can impact the experience. Notable findings include the overall negative nature of the experiences reported across the sample, accompanied by negative

emotions and limited levels of understanding. These findings align with those of previous studies, as highlighted above. Overall, low levels of diagnosis and disclosure of autism were reported, along with low rates of identification by police. The participants displayed a level of engagement within the community, but relatively low levels of service usage and access. Furthermore, the present study aligns with the findings asserted by Rava et al. (2017) in that almost all of the participants reported being stopped and questioned despite not having committed an offence. High rates of autistics being stopped and questioned by police personnel is an area that warrants further inquiry.

The rich and detailed information that is made accessible through the use of alternative methodologies is an important factor that ought to be considered when approaching further research. Moreover, the present study's limitations in recruitment provides insight into areas that should be considered in future work if such barriers are to be overcome. The findings of the present study, and their positioning within the literature, further emphasise and support the need for more research to be undertaken so that effective and meaningful changes can be implemented.

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Ethical standards

Declaration of conflict of interests

Sophia Calton has declared no conflicts of interest. Guy Hall has declared no conflicts of interest.

Ethical approval

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the Murdoch University Human Research Ethics Committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Informed consent

Informed consent was obtained by all participants included in this study.

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